

"The Terror" and the Defection  
of General Dumouriez

Michael J. Gilbert

HST 347

Dr. Doina Pasca Harsanyi

November 14, 2009

On the eve of the Revolution, a 50 year old Charles François Dumouriez had established himself as one of France's most prominent Generals<sup>1</sup>. He was a hero of the Seven Years' War and afterwards was given command in Cherbourg to deal with the contested Channel Islands up until the Revolution. When the National Constituent Assembly broke away from the Estates General in June of 1789, all accounts suggests that General Dumouriez, much like General Lafayette, the hero of the American Revolution, was in support of the new revolutionary government. Also like Lafayette, Dumouriez served the new government and the succeeding governments by leading its forces against the enemies of the Revolution and shared a belief with other enlightened nobles that a reconciliation resulting in a constitutional monarchy could be achieved. When the Revolution took a turn toward radical republicanism and the National Convention, dominated by the Jacobins put any thoughts of reconciliation to rest with Louis XVI's execution on January 21, 1793, Dumouriez no longer had a vision to fight for. This paper is about the period between Dumouriez's victory at Jemappes on November 6, 1792 up to his defection to the Austrians on April 1, 1793, a few weeks after his defeat commanding a French Army at Neerwinden. His defection just before the official start of the "Reign of Terror" was not just a coincidence, his defection is marked as fuel for the fire against the Girondin party he was associated with which would see them out of the Convention and to the guillotine on October 31<sup>st</sup> of the same year. While on leave in Paris after Jemappes, did Dumouriez see the writing on the wall? Did he see "The Terror" coming?

General Dumouriez's feelings of victory were short lived as Minister of War Jean-Nicolas Pache ordered him to take his Army immediately to Cologne to protect Liège from imperial forces.<sup>2</sup> His "Belgian Plan"<sup>3</sup> already showing signs of failure, he managed to send his

---

<sup>1</sup> See Biography page for background information at <http://gencharlesfrancoisdumouriez.wikispaces.com/Biography>

<sup>2</sup> Broadley and Rose, *Dumouriez and the Defence of England against Napoleon* (London: John Lane Co, 1909), 146.

worn down army to Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) while he returned to Paris in January of 1793 just in time to plead for the life of the King who he had served at various stages in his life.<sup>4</sup>

Dumouriez failure to proceed onto Cologne along with his complaints about supplies had already made him suspicious to the evermore radical Jacobins back in Paris, and now trying to save the life of the Tyrant? This act on the behalf of the ancien régime cast further doubts on Dumouriez's commitment to the Republic, and at this point he came to be associated with the Girondins, pleading for exile of the king instead of death.

After the Kings death, Richard Munthe Brace tells us that "Dumouriez was in a rebellious mood when he left Paris on January 6, 1793 to rejoin his command."<sup>5</sup> He returned to his Army in Belgium and found that support from the Convention in the way of food and supplies had been at best minimal, his soldiers were told to pillage the countryside for their provisions. This further upset Dumouriez because not only did the Convention consider him a royalist and fail to support his army to his liking, but he was expected to annex and pillage the territory of the Walloons he identified himself with and had worked to liberate as foreign minister and a field commander. In February, while Dumouriez was working on negotiations with Britain and the United Provinces to avoid conflict in parts of the Low Countries, the Convention back in Paris declared war on both.<sup>6</sup> Now Dumouriez was expected to use his ill-equipped Army of the North to conquer the Dutch he had hoped to win over by liberating them while engaging the Austrians and Prussians. With the help of Venezuelan born General Francisco de Miranda, Dumouriez made plans to carry out the doomed conquest.<sup>7</sup> But in the face of the Austrians, Dutch, Prussians, émigrés, and the discontentment of the people in the

---

<sup>3</sup> See Patricia Chastain Howe, *Foreign Policy and the French Revolution* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> B. & R. *Napoleon*, 153.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Munthe Brace, "Carnot and the Treason of Dumouriez" *The Journal of Modern History* 21, no. 4 (1949): 313.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

French occupied Low Countries, the advance quickly became bogged down and General Dumouriez left the front in order to restore order among the Belgians whom the French had treated poorly by pillaging the countryside. It was at this point, March 12<sup>th</sup> that he wrote back to the Convention blaming them for the unrest in the occupied territories.<sup>8</sup> Howe tells us that this letter, coupled with the defeats on the front while he was back reassuring the Belgians “aroused great animosity in both the Convention and the Jacobin Club.”<sup>9</sup> Some, like Pierre LeBrun, saw Dumouriez’s action to restore order among the Belgians as essential, and in spite of his affront to the Convention, and after calming the Belgians, he set to work on a counter offensive against the allied armies that had made territorial gains in his absence. Still ill-equipped, Dumouriez managed to push the Imperial forces under Prince Coburg back into western Belgium. In the days from March 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> near the village of Neerwinden, Dumouriez, with roughly 40,000 troops attacked a force with relatively equal numbers. Broadley and Rose suggest that Dumouriez’s tactics were sound but that the French volunteers were not equal to the Imperial regulars.<sup>10</sup> The pitched battle of Neerwinden resulted in a defeat for Dumouriez and the French resulting in the commissioners and Miranda pointing fingers at him for the poor results. Already under suspicion as a royalist, this defeat further put a wedge between himself and Paris who had only let him keep his command because of his military abilities.<sup>11</sup> Forced to fall back to Brussels, Dumouriez, realizing that his army was in no condition to make battle and with support from Paris not likely, sought to make a separate peace with the allies.<sup>12</sup> In his personal negotiations with the allies, it was clear that a peace could not be reached without a restoration of

---

<sup>8</sup> B.&R. *Napoleon*, 169.

<sup>9</sup> Howe, *Foreign Policy*, 161.

<sup>10</sup> B. & R. *Napoleon*, 174.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>12</sup> Howe, *Foreign Policy*, 164,

the monarchy, something Dumouriez had hoped for all along.<sup>13</sup> Thus his ill-fated campaign to restore the monarchy began. Howe explains Dumouriez's mindset by writing: "Although Dumouriez was clearly aware that his plans to march against the Convention in Paris would be considered treason to the republic declared on 10 August, to his mind he was not acting as a traitor to the original revolution and the constitution that it had produced, nor to any Bourbon who accepted a constitutional monarchy."<sup>14</sup> But by this point the Jacobin poison in Paris against this "royalist" and "traitor" had made his hopes of a counter-revolution nothing more than a dream. While evacuating his troops from Belgium, most of them went back to the republican lines instead of staying to fight with him. Many more soldiers crossed over to the republican cause during the brief campaign itself while marching to Paris.<sup>15</sup> The counter-revolution thus disintegrated without any serious battles.

What was Dumouriez left to do at this point? He clearly could not remain in France, where even his Girondin allies would shy away from him. He had failed to protect France from foreign invasion and then allied himself with the foreigners and attempted to lead a counter-revolutionary force back to Paris. Clearly, not many options were open to General Dumouriez at this point. It was not hard at all for him to see the proverbial "writing on the wall." Whether or not he saw the official "Terror" coming is not significant, what is significant is that "The Terror" had arrived for him. He famously had the commissioners of the Convention sent to dispose him arrested and handed them over to the Austrians, and offered his services to the allies.<sup>16</sup> In the aftermath of his defection, Paris, Howe argues, witnessed rapid shifts in the powers of the Convention. She states, "The final displacement of the Girondin leadership in the Convention

---

<sup>13</sup> Howe, *Foreign Policy*, 164.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>15</sup> B. & R. *Napoleon*, 182.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 180-81.

began immediately after Dumouriez's defection."<sup>17</sup> It would be the Girondins who would by fall 1793 start wetting the blade of the guillotine. Brace argued above that Dumouriez had realized that his ambitions for a constitutional monarchy were dashed before he left Paris in January,<sup>18</sup> and Howe argues that his only reason for staying on as long as he did was to see through his "Belgian Plan," which he saw as being for the greater good of France and the Walloons he connected himself with.<sup>19</sup> It is clear that General Dumouriez, although an early Jacobin, never wished to fight for a republican France, and when in the winter of 1792-93 while in Paris, he realized that radical republicanism was winning the day in the Capital and he was no longer fighting for the hopes that were conjured in his mind back in Cherbourg when the Revolution was new and exciting, he had two options, certain death or defection. This is why "The Terror" and General Dumouriez will always share the same shelves at libraries.

---

<sup>17</sup> Howe, *Foreign Policy*, 180.

<sup>18</sup> See page 3 or Brace, 313.

<sup>19</sup> Howe, *Foreign Policy*, 190.

## Bibliography

Brace, Richard Munthe. "Carnot and the Treason of Dumouriez." *The Journal of Modern History* (The University of Chicago Press) 21, no. 4 (1949): 313-316.

Broadley, A.M., and J. Holland Rose. *Dumouriez and the Defence of England against Napoleon*. London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1909.

Howe, Patricia Chastain. *Foreign Policy and the French Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.